

Asthma and Tobacco Use

What Is Asthma?

Asthma affects the lungs and causes continuing episodes or attacks of wheezing, shortness of breath, chest tightness, and cough. It is not clear what causes asthma, but genetic and environmental factors can increase the risk for an episode or attack. Factors that can cause an asthma attack, also called triggers, include allergens (such as pet dander, dust mites, mold, pollen, and food allergies), air pollution, secondhand tobacco smoke, exercise, strong odors and cold weather.

Who Has Asthma?

Anyone can have asthma. In fact, it is one of the most common chronic diseases in the United States, affecting nearly 20 million people. In Kentucky, about one in ten adults has asthma.

Asthma affects more than 6 million children in the United States. In Kentucky it is estimated that about one in ten children also has asthma. 363,000 children in Kentucky are exposed to secondhand smoke in their own homes, increasing the likelihood that they will develop asthma.

How Does Smoking Affect Asthma?

Smoking with Asthma

A person with asthma has airways that are more sensitive to triggers; cigarette smoke increases the irritation and can cause an asthma attack. Cigarette smoke also damages tiny hairs found in the airways, called cilia, which normally keep the airway clear. As a result, people with asthma that smoke do not have good control of their asthma and may have continuing asthma symptoms.

Smoking during Pregnancy

If a pregnant woman has asthma, smoking during pregnancy can increase the mother's risk of having an asthma episode or attack, which decreases the oxygen supply to the baby. Additionally, smoking during pregnancy can increase the child's risk of developing asthma by age five, especially if both the mother and the mother's mother smoked during pregnancy.

Secondhand Smoke and Asthma

Research shows there is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke. In fact, secondhand smoke can worsen asthma and directly cause an asthma episode or attack.

Children are more vulnerable to secondhand smoke. Because children have smaller airways than adults, they breathe faster and are more likely to breathe in more harmful chemicals per pound of their weight than an adult would during the same amount of time. Any household members that smoke and expose children to secondhand smoke increase the risk that a child will develop asthma. If a parent or guardian smokes, children will require more frequent use of asthma medication, and there is an earlier onset of asthma among children whose parents or guardians smoke.

What Should I Do?

If you or your child has asthma the most important thing you can do for yourself and your child is to quit smoking. For information about tobacco cessation, call the 1-800-QUIT-NOW help line. You can also contact the tobacco coordinator at your local health department for programs near you.

For more information about controlling and managing your asthma talk with your physician or health care professional.



Sources: www.clevelandclinic.org/, www.aaaai.org, www.kylung.org, www.nap.edu/books/0309064961/html/, <http://www.epa.gov/ebtpages/humahealthasthma.html>

1-800-QUIT NOW